

# Observations of three little-known bird species in northern Angola

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**Observations de trois espèces d'oiseaux peu connues en Angola du nord.** Les auteurs rapportent l'observation, lors d'une visite de six jours en Angola du Nord, en janvier–février 2005, de trois espèces dont la protection est d'intérêt mondial: le Gonolek de Braun *Laniarius brauni* (actuellement classé comme Menacé d'extinction), le Cossyphe à tête blanche *Cossypha heinrichi* (Vulnérable) et la Cisticole à queue noire *Cisticola melanurus* (Insuffisamment Documentée). Le gonolek et le cossyphe n'avaient pas été observés dans cette région depuis 1957 et la cisticole depuis 1972.

**Summary.** We report the observation of Braun's Bush-shrike *Laniarius brauni* (currently listed as Endangered), White-headed Robin Chat *Cossypha heinrichi* (Vulnerable) and Black-tailed Cisticola *Cisticola melanurus* (Data Deficient) during a six-day visit to northern Angola, in January–February 2005. The bush-shrike and the robin chat had not been reported from this region since 1957 and the cisticola not since 1972.

A six-day visit to northern Angola was made between 26 January and 2 February 2005, to search for three little-known bird species of global conservation concern: Braun's Bush-shrike *Laniarius brauni*, an Angolan endemic currently listed as Endangered, the near-endemic White-headed Robin Chat *Cossypha heinrichi*, classified as Vulnerable, and the Data Deficient Black-tailed Cisticola *Cisticola melanurus* (BirdLife International 2000, 2005). The bush-shrike and the robin chat had not been reported from this region since 1957 and the cisticola not since 1972. The 27-year civil war ending only in 2002 was a major factor in the lack of recent field data from this area.

Using the little information we could glean from Dean (2000), Keith *et al.* (1992) and Urban *et al.* (1997), we attempted to visit the type localities of the three species and to search these areas for suitable habitat. The area given for Braun's Bush-shrike, at within 30 km of Quiculungo, Kwanza Norte province (precise locality given as 08°27'S 15°17'E in the type specimen database of the Natural History Museum, Tring, UK), had limited road access due to the civil war. On 30 January we travelled towards this region and examined extensive and pristine forested areas beside the only road north from Quibaxe to Uige town, Uige Province. No Braun's Bush-shrikes were found in the forests at higher elevations (1,200–1,400 m). On descending to lower forested areas (900–1,000 m), we stopped at the

approach to Uige town to examine some hirundine flocks for Red-throated Cliff Swallows *Hirundo rufigula*. At this point the road bisects some not very extensive degraded forest, from where the deep, guttural call of a bush-shrike was heard close by. Three pairs of Braun's Bush-shrikes were found in a period of 30–40 minutes and one bird was photographed. Their calls were very similar to both Luhder's *L. luehderi* and Gabela Bush-shrikes *L. amboimensis*, both in their contact-calls and duetting song. This area is 40–60 km north-east of the type locality.

En route to Calandula (formerly known as Duque de Bragança), the nearest town to the type locality of White-headed Robin Chat, we stopped at a bridge crossing the River Luínga, 2 km west of Luínga town, Malanje Province. On 31 January, Lepe Cisticola *C. erythrops lepe* was very common in the long grass adjacent to and in the flooded areas of the river. Although only slightly paler, its call and song were very different from those of Red-faced Cisticola *C. e. erythrops*, the song being more melodious and liquid.

On 1 February, 30 km north of Calandula, we observed the first White-headed Robin Chats. At a nearby village we questioned some elderly locals if they remembered any people who had been shooting birds in the area in the past. They informed us that there had been a large group of Portuguese, with one German amongst them, who had stayed in the area for many months in the 1950s. The villagers had assisted them as porters

and guides whilst they collected birds, mammals and many other things. From this information, we concluded we had found the locality where the German ornithologist Heinrich first collected *Cossypha heinrichi*.

White-headed Robin Chat was first heard singing in the late evening of 31 January. Its song resembles that of White-browed Robin Chat *C. heuglini* in structure, but is much higher pitched and faster. On 1 February one was seen briefly, flying across a track near a small river, and thereafter it was observed in the dense undergrowth whereupon the all-white head, orange underparts and long, graduated tail were clearly seen. On the same day, a further five individuals were observed low down in dense thickets adjacent to the river, where the soft contact-call drew attention to their presence. At rest, they momentarily opened and closed the tail whilst slowly moving it up and down. The song was tape-recorded and the response to its playback was astonishing: two individuals ventured from the undergrowth into the canopy, singing explosively. They flew back and forth across the forest track at a height of 10–15 m, continually fanning and closing their tails. In one instance, a singing bird hovered in mid-air with its body angled at 45°, whilst continuing to fan and close its tail. During this frantic response to playback, one individual was seen flycatching, like a huge African Paradise Flycatcher *Terpsiphone viridis* with a white head. Shortly after sunrise on 2 February, a single White-headed Robin Chat was observed hawking insects from a perch in the canopy, 15 m above ground. Over a stretch of 1.8 km that we explored on the northern bank of the small river, we encountered 5–8 individuals, with a further two on the south bank. This forest patch was highly disturbed, being close to two villages whose inhabitants used the river almost all day for ablutions and collecting water. The gallery forest was degraded and reduced along the river, with cultivation encroaching all around. It was most surprising to find the species tolerant of such habitat degradation and disturbance, and also to be so common.

The gallery forest frequented by White-headed Robin Chat was surrounded by climax and more open miombo woodland that held many bird species typical of the habitat. We searched for Black-tailed Cisticola, an endemic of well-developed miombo woodland, and discovered a pair on 2 February. We observed its unusual forag-

ing behaviour: it crept amongst the leaves and outer extremities of the foliage in the canopy, in the company of hyliotas and eremomelas. Its long, black tail was obvious, whilst its peculiar wing-flicking and snapping was also noticed. This was not continual but only occurred when the bird was agitated or disturbed. It was not the exaggerated wing-snapping, branch-hopping and tail-swinging of the São Tomé Prinia *Prinia mollerii*, with which this species has been compared (Sinclair & Ryan 2003).

Further exploration is needed to more accurately establish the conservation status of these three species. Braun's Bush-shrike and White-headed Robin Chat were both relatively easy to find and appeared locally common in the small areas explored. Black-tailed Cisticola was also located after a short search, but only one pair was seen.

GPS localities and sound-recordings of some species mentioned in this note are available at The British Library's National Sound Archive, London, UK.

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